

Masonic Aprons and their Symbolism.

Introduction

When I was initiated into Freemasonry I enjoyed the ritual for the Entered Apprentices Apron but found as I progressed through the other two degrees the ritual for the Aprons seemed not to match as nicely as it had for the 1st degree. I, therefore, resolved myself to investigate this and understand more of what our aprons signify.

Aprons - Well what are they?

An apron is a clothing garment that protects the wearer and stops their normal clothes from getting ruined. For example, a person who is cooking, doing carpentry, working as a blacksmith or doing stonework would all wear aprons. However, these aprons are a full length in size by this I mean they cover from the chest down to about the mid-thigh area of the legs. Whereas a masonic apron is worn from the waist down.

The wearing of an apron has been used in religious ceremonies, for example, the Egyptian and Hebrew priests wore an Abnet which was considered an apron and it was meant to represent Authority.

In the case of the apron in Masonry, it is an item that is used as a mark of favour from the Worshipful Master. The candidate is invested and is told that this is the badge of honour of the degree the mason has just taken part in.

For example, after being initiated the new apprentice is invested with a white lambskin apron. Where he is told that it is an ancient emblem of purity and innocence. More honourable than the garter and older than the roman eagle. He should always look after it as it will look after him!

As the candidate is passed to the second degree, the lambskin apron is replaced with one that has two sky-blue rosettes on it, the Emulation ritual in use under the guidance of UGLE states that it shows the candidates progress in the science of Freemasonry. In the Emulation ritual book, there is no extended or traditional explanation of the sudden addition of the two blue rosettes or even the colour apart from these additions "mark the progress you have made in the science."

To mark the candidate's raising to the sublime degree of a Master Mason the apron has changed from a white lambskin apron with 2 rosettes. To one with a sky-blue ribbon around the apron with an additional rosette on the triangular flap, there are two vertical ribbons on the apron with seven metal tassels attached to each of the vertical ribbons. The apron is no longer secured to the wearer by a white string and tied. But with a sky-blue ribbon that is clasped together by a metal serpent. The standard text in the blue book passes over the whole change by saying "to mark the further progress you have made in the Science" At my mother lodge, they use the long explanation from the ritual book;

Bro Jones by the WM's command, I invest you with the distinguishing badge of a MM to mark the further progress you have made in the science. Your white lambskin apron has been replaced by one with a light blue border, having three rosettes arranged in a triangular fashion with the point uppermost. The colour of the silk, the triangle and the three rosettes, have special meanings. The two vertical ribbons typify And The import of which has already been explained to you. To each of these ribbons seven tassels are attached to remind us that no Lodge is perfect unless seven Brethren are present, that in olden days the seven ages of man were thought to be influenced by

seven then known planets, and no MM was considered efficient unless he had some knowledge of the seven liberal arts and sciences.

I have always felt that this part "***The colour of the silk, the triangle and the three rosettes, have special meanings***" sounds like, "***and we are not going to tell you so there!***"

Hence, I have been confused about our aprons, as you see they change again when you are Master of the lodge and if you receive Provincial Grand Rank or London Grand Rank and again at Grand Rank.

But we have all seen that at some point Masonic aprons changed, what I mean by this well look at this example:



This is a Master Mason's Apron from 1782 which was George Washington's. As you can see it different from our own, so what happened, how did we go from the 1782 version to the one we have now, another example, this time is a hand-painted apron from the late 18th / Early 19th Century.



The answer to that, like most of the changes that have happened in Masonry, was due to the unification of the 2 Premier Grand Lodges in England in 1813. Not all changes occurred that year but that was the catalyst of them.

From time immemorial we are told that initiates into our order were clothed in lambskin aprons as a sign of purity and innocence. It would have been remarkably similar to our apprentice aprons. But the flap of the apron would be turned up. Being informed that this was how the apron was worn by entered Apprentices at the building of King Solomon's temple. When you pass to the second degree and the Senior Deacon takes you to the Senior Warden to be instructed how a craftsman wears his apron.

*"The Deacon now conducts the candidate to the Senior Warden's station. This officer leaves his Seat, and, approaching candidate, turns the flap of His apron down, at the same time saying--**Brother, At the building of King Solomon's Temple, the Fellow Crafts wore their aprons with the flap turned***

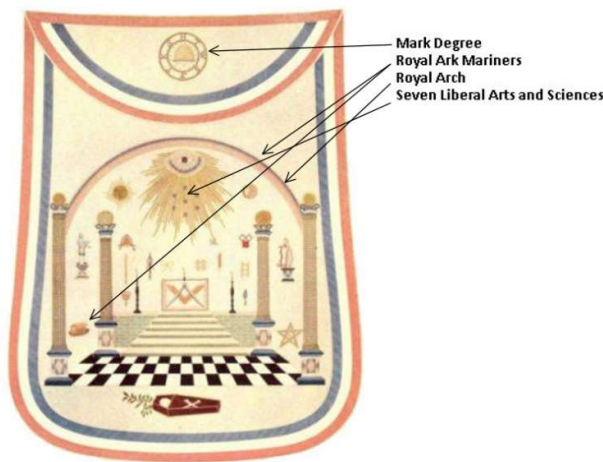
*Down and the corner turned up, and thus you will
Wear yours, until further advanced. (Tucks a
Corner under the string.)"*

Finally raised as a Master Mason, again as we have in our ritual the candidate is conducted to the Senior Warden.

*Master Masons wear their aprons with the flap and corners down,
To designate them as Master Masons,
Or as overseers of the work,
And so you will wear yours.*

I must point out that these ritual extracts come from Duncan's Ritual of Freemasonry book the extract is from the third edition 1866. The Master Mason's apron was like our own in design. But I am using this to show how the apron was worn, but pre 1813 the apron you first received was worn with corners and flaps down. As time went on you were allowed to decorate the apron with Masonic symbols. As the Mason entered side degrees then the symbology of those degrees he had join would appear. For example, you may have worn a lapel pin for a Craft symbol or have seen a triple TAU pin, an Arrow, Knights Templar one in your lodges.

In past days they were embroidered on to the apron like the examples below:



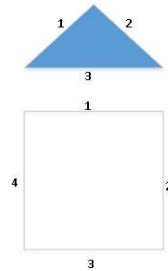
Taking the belief that in the latter days of the 1700s more landed gentry and higher classes were joining Stone Mason lodges as they became more speculative than operative. The aprons became more decadent and with the creation of the United Grand Lodge of England uniformity and the fact that it only controlled the 3 craft degrees and Royal Arch. Meant that Keystones, Arrows and Rainbows although legitimate Masonic symbols had no place on a Master Mason's Apron. Therefore, the rosettes were added to the Craftsman apron, and the additional rosette, vertical ribbons, silver metallic tassels, a serpent clasp and the sky-blue trim around the apron and belt. As the long explanation of the Master Mason's Apron tells us they all have special meanings.

What are these meanings and what is the symbolism?

EA Apron

As we have said earlier it is made from the skin of a lamb, which is the symbol of innocence and purity. It also consists of three parts, a square of lambskin, and a triangle of skin to form a flap on the apron and finally a cord in which to tie it around the wearer.

As discussed earlier the flap/triangle was worn with its point up so we have a 3 sided shape attached to the 4 sided square the sum of the sides is seven, which as we are told in the extended explanation for the Master Mason's apron was that 7 Brethren present makes the perfect lodge.



The number 7 is a reoccurring theme within the Craft; 3 principle officers and 2 Deacons, Inner Guard and a Tyler. These 7 represent the "seven-fold" constitution of Man's nature. This is something we are all aware of but not really, we all know we have a body, a soul and a spirit. This is the basic idea that St. Paul brings to Christianity, these ideas can be found in the teachings from the mystery schools of old and in some sects of Christianity. For although once considered part of mainstream Christian teachings it has been overshadowed by damnation and salvation of one's soul.

The seven are:

1. The Body, or Rupa.
2. Vitality, or Prana-Jiva.
3. Astral Body, or Linga-Sarira.
4. Animal Soul, or Kama-Rupa
5. Human Soul, or Manas.
6. Spiritual Soul, or Buddhi.
7. Spirit, or Atma,

The body, Spiritual Soul and Spirit being part of the teachings of St. Paul for example:

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23

The Atma is Spirit, Buddhi is the highest power of intellection, that which discerns and judges, and Manas is Mind. They form the trinity that was allegorised in the Christianity as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Making them a divine triangle or Real Man.

The other four are known as the quaternary or lower man and are the materialistic side of Man.

- Passions and desires (Kama-Rupa)
- Life principle (Prana-Jiva),
- Astral body (Linga-Sarira)
- Physical body (Rupa).

Making a square of matter/body the imperfections of man that a Mason must overcome on his journey to enlightenment.

The triangle as we have suggested above has been used in Ancient Mystery systems throughout the world to signify or denote the Spirit or that which is not obvious to the eye. A triangle has been known to represent fire, looking at the religion of Hinduism they have Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (Destroyer). Shiva is represented by a triangle and signifies the flame which rises upwards from a funeral pyre. This flame in essences points to Heaven.

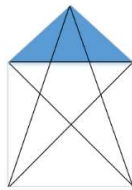
Egypt is famous for its pyramids, which are? Yes, triangular in shape. These places are known to be tombs for the dead but also it is said that rituals took place there for spiritual devotion. Even if they are as academia suggests tombs then the burial chamber was said to have a sealed door or Spirit door that allowed the dead Pharaoh to transcend to the next life. Again, confirming the idea that the triangle represents the Spirit. In Christianity, a spire is used on the tops of Churches and Cathedrals to show this flame of the spirit in its aspirations in reaching for God or to the Heavens.

Spires do not start from the ground but rest on top of rectangular towers, which matches to the quadrangle shape section of the apron. This part of the apron is meant to represent Matter, the world or Materialism. Something that can be measured and weighed by the senses of man. Therefore, it is something with form in which case it is an allegory for the body of man like the triangle is an allegory for the spirit of man.

The apron if displayed with the flap extended with the upper most point pointing up then what we have is a representation of the spirit of the candidate outside of his body and not within his body or his conscious. Yes, the Candidate has gone through a cleansing ceremony of initiation but at this point, the spirit does not know whether the body will continue with the ideals it has purported to do. The spirit is therefore tethered to the body via two cords keeping the spirit and body together and these cords take the place of the Cable Tow that you entered in on.

Reminding you to be cautious and not to rush forward, as you work to bring union between your spirit and body. Why does the spirit need to be tethered to the body, for although the body and has said it will give up the want of monies and the lures of the world in the ritual he has passed through, the spirit is not fully convinced that the body will stay the course it has just started!

The apron is made from a lamb as the lamb itself is considered a symbol of innocence as is the colour white, hence its use as the primary colour of wedding dress, baptism robes etc. As a bond of friendship to our brothers as we all share the same frailty of life, but with the flap up on the apron makes a pentagram shape that has 5 points which later on in our progression is another reminder of the five points of fellowship.



Within the initiation ritual, you are asked if you have about your person any metallic or valuable substance. *This again comes back to the idea that no metal substance was on the high priest when he went to the sanctum sanctorum once a year to offer devotion to the Most Divine.*

Fellow Craft's Apron.

This apron is made from a white lambskin with two sky-blue rosettes on the square, the triangular flap is now pointing down to the centre of the square. This is to signify that the candidate has made

further progress in the science of freemasonry and his spirit (here symbolised by the triangle) has descended into his body (the square).

Looking again at Hinduism the downward triangle represents Vishnu the Preserver. It symbolises rain which preserves the fruitful earth. Therefore, the down-pointing triangle in the square means the descent of the divine spirit into matter.

It thus represents the candidate has subdued his passion and material needs and is becoming in tune with his spirit. Although this bond is not fully complete as the apron is still secured to the wearer by the symbolic cable-tow represented by the cords around the waist.

In this degree we learned that *plenty* is depicted as an ear of corn near a fall of water, this appears on the apron as the two rosettes. As they are the seeds planted in the first degree and are now sprouting as the Candidate understands his spiritual progress. As the sun and rain fertilise the seeds of the corn so through wisdom and guidance the Candidate can now begin to perceive his spirit within his body. The colour of the rosettes represents the colour of the heavens, these flower on his "body" as emblems of the spirits celestial origins.

The entered apprentice degree is the foundation degree, preparing the candidate to begin his journey to enlightenment, ergo planting the ideas and principles within him. The Fellowcrafts degree shows the mid-point of him passing from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence on the path to enlightenment. The rosettes symbolise this as soul and body established in strength. Note the idea of the two pillars one the priestly pillar J and the kingly pillar B. Establishing this mine house to stand firm forever! Or a Mason's internalised Temple.

Master Mason's Apron.

The apron has now been altered again signifying the candidate's strengthening spiritual centre not only has a third rosette flourished in the centre of the triangle but the three rosettes together make a triangle showing that the spirit of this man firmly within the body in a balanced union.

The apron now contains metallic substances, even though in previous degrees we had denounced them ensuring none was about our person. But it should be pointed out that silver in ancient times symbolised the soul, as gold refers to the spirit. The cord has been replaced by a sky-blue ribbon held together by a silver serpent which in itself is a symbol that represents Divine Wisdom in the ancient world. The silver tassels are the light that comes from above illuminating his intelligence it is not surprising that there are 7 tassels as white light is made up of seven waveforms of the electromagnetic spectrum. These are attached to sky-blue sashes that are vertical, Heaven's blue and heavenly light shining in the middle of the apron.

The new-made Master Mason has gone through a figurative death and come out of it resurrected as a new being, *"the perfected Initiate has mastered his lower nature and has become the Perfect Man."* He is no longer ruled by materialistic views or wants but now focuses on the more spiritual plain.

Alternative hypothesis.

The Premier Grand lodge had ruled in the 18th century that its Grand lodge officers would wear Royal Blue which was coincidentally the ruling Monarch's family colour. Scotland chose green which was the Stuarts' royal house colour and as this was the period of the Jacobite rebellion it would be have been unpatriotic to have green on the regalia in England at that time. It had been decided that the Grand Stewards Lodge would wear crimson as such Acting Stewards still wear crimson today.

One tradition holds that when a mason was passed to the fellow crafts degree the left-hand corner was buttoned up to signify his rank. Then when he was raised, the right-hand corner of his aprons

was also button up thus creating a pocket in the apron for the tools he uses. According to Rev. Neville B. Cryer, "*In North America this latter practice is widely maintained.*"

However, in England, these buttonholes are replaced with two rosettes and what it suggests is that it shows the wearer has reached the second degree. Hence the addition of the third rosette means this is the Third Degree. The two vertical sashes are a reminder of how the old aprons were tied, the cord would go around the body and tied in a bow under the flap, the two ends would be visible. On the Master Mason's apron as we have mentioned earlier is no longer cord but a belt and catch. The vertical straps and tassels have no significance apart from reminding us of older operative masons' aprons. There is also no symbology of 7 pendants that hang from the strips as there have been times when nine sometimes twelve were placed there.

The apron is light blue to distinguish it from the Royal blue that is worn by the Grand Ranks. At one point it had been suggested that the Master of the lodge should wear Orange but guess what that is the Colour of the Dutch Royal House, therefore, the idea was rejected. In North America, some of the Masters wear Purple to differentiate between them and the Master Masons in the lodge.

Installed and Past Masters

Installed Masters and Past Master aprons have a slightly different design as the rosettes are replaced by upside-down T shapes. Now some theories say they are 3 TAUs but this more of Royal Arch symbol. But to be fair they may not be the TAU symbol, J.S.M Ward said,

*"The T cross, the symbol of the
Male or creative side of the Deity; and, lest there should be any
Mistake, the T is placed on the apron of the Master of the Lodge,
Though placed _|_, so as to give also the symbol of the square,
And also to emphasise its phallic meaning."*

Yes, but the book of constitutions clearly defines them as, "*Perpendicular lines upon horizontal lines, thereby forming three several sets of two right angles*". Which W.Bro. Wilmshurst suggests that it is the plumb line and the motion of the Trowel which creates a Tau symbol, which the newly invested Master now has on his apron, implying that he knows the use of these two tools. Others have suggested that these are the working tools that adorn the Senior and Junior Wardens regalia and on the Master's progression to the chair of King Solomon and he now has knowledge of their use. By combining the Plumb rule and the Level it forms the Master Jewel of the Square.

Wilmshurst goes onto say:

"The master is a Cross, a living Cross, and therefore wears the sign of the Cross upon his clothing."
Even though we are not calling the _|_ a Tau, the Tau Cross manifests itself and brings us back to the idea of the ancient mystery schools if Plato et al. That the principle of the Cross is to work to resolve the two opposing principles of the spiritual and the Material through unity and harmony.

Provincials and Grand Rank.

If you are promoted in the craft to the higher echelons then your regalia changes to Royal blue and gold replaces the silver previously used. The gold represents the spirit, the idea being that they have further evolved their soul and the spiritual awareness with their God that they have transformed it from silver into gold. As can be seen on a Grand Lodge officer's apron it has sprouted more elaborate embroidery reiterating their spiritual development.

Conclusion

I think I have found some of the answers to why our aprons are the way they are and why they are not as decadent as the ones worn in the 18th Century. It has certainly answered the special meaning of where the triangle, colour and rosettes come from. For me, I will lean to the speculative side that they are part of our journey on a path to enlightenment.

The idea that the rosettes are buttonholes, well I can't get it myself, why is this well if the apron is a symbol of purity and innocence yet the blue rosettes are symbols of buttonholes. It seems rather an odd thing to do when we say that Freemasonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, to not just have buttonholes!

Nothing in Freemasonry is haphazard, at least of all when it most seems so.

The Predominant Wish by Major R. Watkins-Pitchford.

Reference

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